DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 413 FL 013 463

AUTHOR	Gentry, Larry A.
TITLE	What Research Says about Revision.
INSTITUTION	California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	82
CONTRACT	400-80-0180
NOTE	14p.; In its: "CATESOL Occasional Papers," Number 8, p.96-108, Fall 1982; For related documents, see FL 013 455-462.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*English (Second Language); Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The process, content, and effect of revision in the writing process is analyzed in light of recent writing process research. Taylor calls for an approach to English as second language composition in which students are taught how to write with an emphasis on revision. Most authorities agree that revision entails a complex set of behaviors that occur throughout the writing process. Studies of revision content indicate that some revision processes, even the more complex ones, can be taught to younger learners. The research also shows that relatively complex revision skills have been less effectively taught than the simpler skills involving spelling or punctuation. It is argued that revision is one of the least taught writing skills and that most composition students are allowed to submit rough-draft copy. Teachers must learn to view early drafts as unfinished rather than wrong. (RW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED225413

California Association -
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 8 (Fall, 1982)

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT REVISION

Larry A. Gentry
SWRL Educational Research & Development
Los Alamitos, California

In recent years a number of writers have called attention to the relative neglect of composition instruction in ESL classrooms.[1] Given the audio-lingual orientation of most theorists and policy-makers in the field, such a position is understandable, if not forgivable. Many ESL teachers would like to provide more meaningful writing instruction, but deem themselves inadequate to the challenge.

Certainly, there has been a paucity of academic guidance in helping such teachers promote growth in composition. Zamel[2] points out that research in ESL composition is virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, she contends, there is a source of relevant information that language educators can turn to--mainstream research in English composition.

The general area of writing research has undergone a minor revolution in the last decade. Research that focuses on grammar, syntax, and the other products of the writing episode is on the wane. Researchers are now looking at what happens during the writing episode itself; in other words, attention has shifted from the writing product to the writing process.[3] Taylor has examined the implications of this new orientation for ESL writing instruction, and concludes that one variable in the writing process that deserves the close attention of language educators is the act of revising. Taylor calls for an approach to ESL composition in which students "are taught how to write and rewrite, refine and recast rough ideas and sketchy drafts into polished essay."[4] The remainder of this paper examines the process of revision and considers Taylor's suggestion in the

FL013463

The work upon which this article is based was performed pursuant to Contract No. 400-80-0180 with the National Institute of Education, Department of Education.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

CATESOL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
  Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

light of recent writing-process research.

REVISION - A RECURSIVE PROCESS

Most theoretical constructs of the writing process contain some suggestion of "re-doing" that which has been written. This "re-doing" element is given various labels by authorities, including such terms as revising, rewriting, postwriting, editing, and reformulating. While there is a consensus that an adequate model of the composing process must contain such an element, there is a notable lack of agreement as to how that element should be defined and described.

Murray,[5] for example, defines revision as ". . . what the writer does after a draft is completed to understand and communicate what has begun to appear on the page." The key phrase here is "after a draft is completed." This appears to equate revision with rewriting, an equation that some authorities, as we shall see, would dispute. Murray does, however, draw an interesting distinction between what he calls "internal" revision. For Murray, internal revision is ". . . everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say, beginning with the reading of a completed first draft." External revision, on the other hand, involves ". . . what writers do to communicate what they have found they have written to another audience. It is editing and proofreading and much more."[6]

Nold[7] seems to have both internal and external elements in mind in her definition of revision:

> Revising . . . is not just correcting the lexicographic and syntactic infelicities of written prose . . . It also includes (1) changing the meaning of the text in response to a realization that the original intended meaning is somehow faulty or false or weak . . . , (2) adding or substituting meaning to clarify the originally intended meaning or to follow more closely the intended form or genre of the text . . . , (3) making grammatical sentences more readable by deleting, reordering and restating as well as (4) correcting errors of diction, transcription and syntax that nearly obscure intended meaning or that are otherwise unacceptable in the grapholect.

Perhaps Emig[8] comes closest to providing an operational definition of revision. She prefers to use "reformulation" as

an umbrella term for three types of textual change: correcting, revising, and rewriting. For Emig,

> . . . correcting is a small, and usually trivial, affair that consists of eliminating discrete 'mechanical errors' and infelicities . . . Revising is a larger task involving the reformulation of larger segments of discourse and in more major and organic ways--a shift of point of view toward the material in a piece; . . . Rewriting is the largest of the three, often involving total reformulation of a piece in all its aspects; or the scrapping of a given piece, and the writing of a fresh one.

Sommers[9] takes issue with those who define revision as a particular "stage" in the writing process. She contends that revision is ". . . part of the generative nature of the composing process . . . not a stage, but a process that occurs throughout the writing of a work."

Linear stage models are, according to Sommers, inadequate and misleading. She believes it more profitable to think of writing as ". . . a recursive process; a process characterized by significant recurring patterns and the repetition of the same operations during different cycles. (A cycle is not the same thing as a stage since it cannot be defined by a single objective or process.)"[10]

Flower and Hayes[11] agree with Sommers that the concept of linear stages does little to explain actual writing behavior:

> Stage models, which take the final product as their reference point, are adequate metaphors for distinguishing the large, abstract "stages" of a process that might go on for days or weeks. But they offer an inaccurate, even misleading description of the more intimate, moment-by-moment intellectual process of composing.

Murray[12] catches the flavor of this generative and recursive process in his discussion of how writers move both backwards and forwards during the process of internal revision:

> They move from a revision of the entire piece down to the page, the paragraph, the sentence, the line, the phrase, the word. And then, because each word may give off an explosion of meaning, they move out from the word to the phrase, the line, the sentence, the paragraph, the piece. Writers move in close and then move out to visualize the entire piece. Again and again and again.

On this most authorities are in agreement: revision is not a simple or singular procedure (e.g., proofreading, rewriting) that must be attended to at a particular point in composing. It is, rather, a complex set of behaviors that occur throughout the writing act.

THE CONTENT OF REVISION

What types of changes do writers make when they alter their texts? An answer to this question may provide us with some important clues regarding the differences between "good" writers and "poor" writers, and may assist us in identifying significant developmental characteristics among those who are learning to write.

Sommers[13] compared the revisions made by seven experienced adult writers with those made by eight college freshmen. The experienced writers made almost six times as many revisions as the freshmen. The freshmen saw revision as essentially a "rewording activity" and expressed an overriding concern for vocabulary usage. The adults, on the other hand, viewed revision as a process of structuring and shaping their message. The students made 71% of their changes at the word and phrase levels, and only 23% of their changes at the sentence level. The adults made only 31% of their changes at the word and phrase levels, but 54% at the sentence level.

Stallard[14] found similar differences between the revision operations of 15 high school seniors who scored high on a standardized writing test and 15 of their lower-scoring classmates. Students in both groups wrote a brief essay on a recent news event of their choice. The "good" writers made 184 changes in their essays, averaging 12.24 revisions per paper, while the comparison group made only 64 changes, or 4.26 per paper. Both groups made more single-word changes than any other kind, with the "good" writers making 109 word changes and the others making 35. Perhaps more significant, however, is that the "good" writers made 42 multiple-word changes, while the control group made only four.

The results of Stallard's study indicate that "good" high school senior writers revise much like Sommer's college freshmen. Their predominant concern is word choice. They do, however, show a developmental advancement over less proficient writers in their attention to multiple-word revision.

What prevents the less-proficient writer from revising beyond the word level? Perl[15] casts some light on this subject with

her study of the composing processes of five unskilled community-college writers. Noting that less than 11% of their revisions pertained to matters of content, she postulated that, for these students, attention to detail interferes with the effective communication of a message. "Editing intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing. . . . As soon as a few words are written on the paper, detection and correction of errors replaces writing and revising."[16]

The studies discussed thus far have been case studies involving a small number of subjects and have dealt exclusively with the composing processes of older adolescents and young adults. A much larger study, and one that invites some interesting comparisons, is an examination of revisions of a national sample of nine, thirteen, and seventeen-year-old students conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.[17] In this study, approximately 2,500 students at each of these levels were given an initial writing assignment (to be written in pencil), and were then allowed additional time to make any desired changes in pen. They were permitted to make changes in the first draft and/or rewrite the first draft completely. Most students attempted some type of revision (60.2% of the 9-year olds, 78.1% of the 13-year-olds, and 68.0% of the 17-year-olds).

Of those who revised, more 9-year-olds made mechanical changes (e.g., spelling, punctuation) than any other type of revision; in both of the older age-groups, more students made stylistic changes (e.g., substitution of a word, phrase, or sentence) than any other type of revision. This would appear to verify the expectation that younger pupils have a more superficial view of revision, a belief that is further reinforced by the fact that cosmetic changes (e.g., appearance, legibility) steadily decreased through the grades; 20.6% of the 9-year-olds, 14.3% of the 13-year-olds, and 8.0% of the 17-year-olds made such changes. Conversely, holistic changes (e.g., radical departure from the original report) increased from 6.0% among the youngest students to 12.0% among the oldest students.

While this study points to a general developmental trend from simple to more complex revision operations, there is some evidence that many of these operations are amenable to instruction, even in the early grades. Graves[18] has recently completed a two-year study of children in the first four years of elementary school which indicates that, with proper instruction, young children are quite capable of complex revision and rewriting strategies.

THE EFFECTS OF REVISION

Bamberg,[19] examining those elements of high school composition programs that best prepared students for college English classes, stated that "One variable which has consistently produced significant differences between experimental and control groups is revision." A review of the studies on which she bases this claim[20] indicates that Bamberg is referring specifically to the rewriting of original drafts based on teacher and/or peer evaluation.

Similarly, Beach[21] found that high school students who rewrote their themes on the basis of teacher evaluations produced better final drafts than those who rewrote on the basis of self-evaluation or no evaluation.

Hansen[22] conducted an interesting experiment involving two groups of college freshmen. Both groups used the same class materials and received the same instruction, including instruction in revision. Revision was taught ". . . as a process of editing and improving the essay's thesis, examples, and paragraph and sentence structure, as well as proofreading for errors in mechanics, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure." The experimental group wrote four essays and submitted them for teacher evaluation. The papers were marked and graded and returned to the students for revision and rewriting, including appropriate changes in content.

The control group wrote the same four essays, but when the students received their corrected compositions, they were instructed only to ". . . proofread their papers and make correction sheets (out of class with the aid of a handbook) of errors in punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics." They were not asked to revise beyond the sentence level, nor to rewrite their essays.

To measure the results of this experiment, Hansen gathered data from impromptu essays written by both groups at the beginning and end of the term. These compositions were scored by four trained evaluators using an eight-category evaluation form. Hansen compared the mean of each group's gains in three categories --proofreading skills, editing skills, and total composition skills. She found no significant differences between the two groups in any of these categories. Both groups, however, made appreciable gains in all three categories from pre-instruction writing to post-instruction writing. Hansen concludes that "The act of revising and rewriting does not in itself result in improved composition skills. . . ."[23] She does, however, believe that the discussion of revision techniques, carried in both groups, ". . . may very well be the teaching procedure which

improved the students' skills."[24]

Hansen's contention that revision without instruction may not result in an improved product is supported by other studies. In the National Assessment study discussed above, both the first draft and the revised draft produced by 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds were given a quality rating from 1 (low) to 4 (high). Commenting on the degree of change between the first and second drafts, the authors concluded that:

> For both the 9- and 13-year olds and for reports in all four categories, approximately 85% of those who revised wrote end products that were categorized the same as their first drafts for overall organization. The remainder of the revisions included almost as many declines as improvements in overall organization.[25]

Perl,[26] in her study of unskilled college writers, found that ". . . despite the students' considered attempts to proofread their work, serious syntactic and stylistic problems remained in their finished drafts."

It is important to note that both the National Assessment's and Perl's findings relate to relatively complex revision skills. The National Assessment report refers to a lack of improvement in "overall organization," while Perl notes the persistence of "syntactic and stylistic problems" after revision. While none of these studies refer to the relative success of attempted revision of less complex matters (e.g., spelling, punctuation), it is likely that students were more successful in performing low-level revision than they were in resolving more difficult problems.

INSTRUCTION IN REVISION

Murray[27] claims that ". . . rewriting is one of the writing skills least researched, least examined, least understood, and--usually--least taught. The vast majority of students. . . get away with first draft copy."

How well does Murray's charge hold up? Square and Applebee[28] conducted a study of 158 high schools with "strong" English departments and found that "Only in about 12 percent of the high schools had students revised their writing completely in response to teacher 'correction'."[29] Hoetker and Brossell[30] asked 1,129 college freshmen how often they had been required to revise papers in their high school English classes. More than 75% responded that they were seldom or never asked to

revise. Of the minority who did revise regularly, only 42% said that their revisions were re-evaluated or re-graded. Similar results were obtained from an informal follow-up survey that elicited reports from 125 school districts. Of approximately 13,000 students, 77% indicated that they were seldom or never asked to revise. Of those who did revise their drafts, 52% of the students in the eighth grade and about 40% of the students of each higher grade level responded that their teachers had "often" or "almost-always" re-evaluated their work.[31]

Emig[32] concluded that the high school seniors in her study did not voluntarily revise school-sponsored writing. Some equated rewriting with punishment; most believed that teachers were more interested in mechanics and grammar than in content. Scardamalia[33] conducted a study in which eighth graders were asked to write a report and then revise what they had written. She found that not only were the students astonished and upset by the assignment, but the majority were unable to make any changes as long as they still had their first drafts in front of them. These writers viewed their first drafts as concrete products, not as a means of exploring thought and sketching ideas.

These studies offer solid confirmation of Murray's contention that revision is one of the least taught writing skills. It appears that teachers have a very narrow view of revision--at best equating it with rewriting a corrected first draft, but more often equating it with the correction of mechanical errors. Through their teachers, students learn to conceive of revision as an aversive activity, or as Murray[34] says, ". . . the price you have to pay if you don't get it right the first time."

Graves[35] believes that writing teachers must learn to respond to early drafts as ". . . not wrong, only unfinished." Following his study of writing instruction, Graves offered these observations of how revision was handled in schools where "good" writing was the norm:

> . . . the teacher's first response was to content, what the child knew or did not know about the subject. Rewriting came first at the point of information, rather than language conventions. Language conventions were dealt with only when the final draft was ready for an audience.[36]

In schools such as those that Graves describes, composition is treated as a process--a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Writing-process research is still in its infancy, but enough is now known to furnish teachers with useful information

--information that can reshape the writing curriculum and thus produce fluent, effective writers.

NEW DIRECTIONS

As a logical outgrowth of the fledgling discipline of writing-process research, the serious study of revision is just beginning. To date, most studies have been of a descriptive nature calling attention to the fact that "revision" is an umbrella term, encompassing a number of different behaviors, and that, far from being a "stage" in the writing process, revision occurs at many different times and places in writing. Future research will be able to capitalize on these findings by focusing on specific types of revision and examining their usefulness at various points in the growth of a written product.

The case-study approach has been useful in outlining the parameters of the writing process and, accordingly, the revising behaviors of specific types of writers. While all such research is valuable and welcome, it should be noted that most such studies have involved either high school seniors or college students. More research is needed with younger writers and, of course, with ESL students of all ages.

Research on revision has important implications for the teaching of ESL composition. Taylor's call for "an approach which places composition revision in a central position"[37] needs to be taken seriously. Students need to learn that revision is a normal and expected part of writing. They need to learn that revision is more than just the correcting of minor errors--that content is every bit as important as spelling. They also need to know when to delay their revisions--to keep the words and the ideas flowing--to see the first draft as an experimental draft. Recommendations such as these, though based on the results of substantive research, stand in marked opposition to traditional ESL practice. If the benefits of such research are to be realized by those that matter--the students--it is imperative that educators be made aware of research on revision and other aspects of the writing process and the implications these studies have for an improved and effective curriculum.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See especially: Christina Bratt Paulston, "Teaching Writing in the ESOL Classroom: Techniques of Controlled Composition," TESOL Quarterly, 6 (March, 1972), pp. 33-59; Barry P. Taylor, "Teaching Composition to Low-Level ESL Students," TESOL Quarterly, 10 (September, 1976), pp. 309-319; Thomas Buckingham, "The Goals of Advanced Composition Instruction," TESOL Quarterly, 13 (June, 1979), pp. 241-254, and Elaine Dehghanpisheh, "Bridging the Gap Between Controlled and Free Composition: Controlled Rhetoric at the Upper-Intermediate Level," TESOL Quarterly, 13 (December, 1979), pp. 509-519.

[2]Vivian Zamel, "Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom: What We Can Learn from Research in the Teaching of English," TESOL Quarterly, 10 (March, 1976), pp. 67-76.

[3]Donald H. Graves, "A New Look at Writing Research," Language Arts, 57 (November/December, 1980), pp. 913-919.

[4]Barry P. Taylor, "Content and Written Form: A Two-Way Street," TESOL Quarterly, 15 (March, 1981), p. 5.

[5]Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 87.

[6]Ibid, p. 91.

[7]Ellen W. Nold, "Alternatives to Mad-Hatterism," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron, OH: Department of English, University of Akron, 1979), pp. 105-106.

[8]Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), p. 43.

[9]Nancy Sommers, "Revision in the Composing Process: A Case Study of College Freshmen and Experienced Adult Writers" (Ed.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 1978), p. 13.

[10]Ibid, p. 159.

[11]Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1980.

[12]Murray, p. 92.

[13]Sommers, "Revision in the Composing Process."

[14]Charles K. Stallard, "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 8 (Summer, 1974), pp. 206-218.

[15]Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 13 (December, 1979), pp. 317-336.

[16]Ibid, p. 333.

[17]National Assessment of Educational Progress, Write/Rewrite: An Assessment of Revision Skills. Writing Report No. 05-W-04 (Denver, CO: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1977).

[18]Donald H. Graves, "What Children Show Us About Revision," Language Arts, 56 (March, 1979), pp. 312-319.

[19]Betty Bamberg, "Composition Instruction Does Make a Difference: A Comparison of the High School Preparation of College Freshmen in Regular and Remedial English Classes," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (February, 1978), pp. 47-59.

[20]Ray C. Maize, "A Study of Two Methods of Teaching English Composition to Retarded College Freshmen" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Purdue University, 1952); Earl W. Buxton, "An Experiment to Test the Effects of Writing Frequency and Guided Practice upon Students' Skill in Written Expression" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1958), and William McColly and Robert Remstad, "Comparative Effectiveness of Composition Skills Learning Activities in the Secondary School" (ERIC #ED 003-279).

[21]Richard Beach, "The Effects of Between-Draft Teacher Evaluation Versus Student Self-Evaluation on High School Students' Revising of Rough Drafts." Research in the Teaching of English, 13 (May, 1979), pp. 111-119.

[22]Barbara Hansen, "Rewriting is a Waste of Time," College English, 39 (April, 1978), pp. 956-960.

[23]Ibid, p. 956.

[24]Ibid, p. 959.

[25]National Assessment, p. 9.

[26]Perl, pp. 331-332.

[27]Murray, p. 85.

[28]James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, High School English Instruction Today (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

[29]Ibid, p. 122.

[30]James Hoetker and Gordon Brossell, "Who (If Anyone) Is Teaching Them Writing and How?" English Journal, 68 (October, 1979), pp. 19-25.

[31]_____, "An EJ Readership Survey Report," English Journal, 69 (May, 1980), pp. 13-19.

[32]Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders.

[33]Marlene Scardamalia, "How Children Cope With the Cognitive Demands of Writing." Paper presented at the National Institute of Education Writing Conference, SWRL Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, CA, 1977.

[34]Donald M. Murray, "Teach the Motivating Force of Revision." Paper presented at the Rutgers Invitational Seminars on the Teaching of Composition, New Brunswick, NJ, 1976. (ERIC #ED 155-714).

[35]Donald H. Graves, "We Won't Let Them Write," Language Arts, 55 (May, 1978), pp. 635-640.

[36]Ibid, p. 639.

[37]Taylor, "Content and Written Form," p. 5.

CORRECTION

The Editor of the Occasional Papers regrets that in the Fall, 1981 issue the following error was inadvertently made in printing Doreen Pat Jeske's article, "Talking on Paper? An Antidote": on pages 84-85, her correct affiliation following the title, in the biographical footnote and in the text is ELS Language Center rather than ESL Language Center.